



Conceptual Analysis of Hermeneutic Media Theory

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Abstract

The field of hermeneutics, guided by the works of philosophers such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, has shaped the approach towards the interpretation of texts and communication. Unlike the more conventional approach to communication, hermeneutics understands communication as distinct from mere transmission and emphasizes the pivotal role of situated interpretation and culture. Its relevance to analyzing texts stems from the interplay and transition accompanying media, journalism, advertising, and digital communication, where meaning is constantly shaped and contested. This seminar incorporated contemporary writings, peer-reviewed articles, and philosophical works precisely to analyze the evolution of the hermeneutic approach to communication. Using desk study methodology and qualitative analysis, the research aimed to address the strengths and weaknesses, namely the instability of meaning across cultural and media contexts, of hermeneutic theory in contemporary communication research. The findings of the research posit that the theory of hermeneutics is invaluable in the field of mass communication because advanced qualitative research needs to be complemented with exploration of the processes by which meanings are constructed, mediated, and interpreted. It enhances qualitative research in the field of mass communication and provides frameworks for audience interpretation, ideological framing, and media ethics. Critiques of the study are its subjectivity, lack of generalizability, and predictive capacity relative to positivist models. The conclusions drawn from the study indicate that the use of mass communication in research will continue to require the use of hermeneutic theory. It recommends that incorporating hermeneutics with restricted balanced empirical approaches can endorsement to fostering deeper interpretative insight as well as methodological rigor in communication studies.

Keywords: *Mass Communication, Interpretation, Media, media studies, qualitative research, media studies*

1 Introduction

The domain of mass communication has undergone a considerable transformation over the years. It is regarded as a powerful tool for appreciating the processes of constructing, transmitting, and receiving meaning in relation to media contexts. Out of the broader philosophical traditions of interpretation, emergency theory provides an important framework for looking not only at what messages convey but also how meanings are created, shaped, and understood by different people (Wilson, 2022). Unlike the branches of positivism that prioritize objectivity and the sending and receiving of messages as linear and static processes, meaning in the context of hermeneutics is social, situationally dynamic, and contextually thick. It is meaning that is fundamentally shaped by the culture, history, and language of a people (Prakoso, 2020). This shift in perspective is useful in examining communication in an advanced, media abundant globalized world where texts circulate across different cultures and locations.

One of the major difficulties that is faced within the field of communication is the instability of meaning as messages travel across various interpretive horizons. Content does not stay constrained within a singular meaning as it traverses across boundaries which are cultural, government, media, or interpretive circles. For instance, a news headline that is broadcasted in Lagos will be interpreted in a manner that is dissimilar in comparison to an audience that is situated in New York. As a result of the cultural frames that are different, the ignorance of body historical memories as well as interpretive traditions, the method by which the texts are reconstructed and decoded is influenced profoundly (Hall, 2021). There is meaning that is fluid, and the meaning is questioned in the context of the media content, which is to be read on the face of it. It is rather a case of the interpretive system which places the act of communication within serous reflexive changes in the social, cultural, and historic components of a system (Meyer & Simons, 2022).

Hermeneutics is the school of thought that rejects the act of naive, simplistic decoding of messages because it encourages understanding media discourse in a more complex manner. Communication, which is the relation of acts, is an act of deep understanding and appreciation, and it is the presenting of a complex matter in a manner that is simplified. Texts are a product of complex interrelations between frames including reporter, audience, and context, whether it is journalistic reports, films, or adverts, and is placed in a discourse of greater interrelation by means that are cultural and historical in reception (Gadamer, 1960/2004). For the purposes of this dialogue, communication is about the means through which meaning is produced and negotiated, and not it is in how it is broken down into an across the linear method of communication.

To journalism, hermeneutics provide a mechanism for exploring frameworks and interpretive horizons of audiences. An illustrative case is an investigative report that, depending on one's socio-political orientation, can be perceived by one community as an act of truth-telling and by another as an ideological assault. Regarding Film and Advertising, hermeneutic scrutiny assists researchers in peeling layers of symbolism, metaphor, and cultural archetypes that shape audience perception. In the realm of Political Communication, practitioners also benefit from hermeneutic inquiry because, within the domain of rhetoric, rhetorical strategies are seldom interpreted in a vacuum. Rather, their interpretation is nested in the broad feelings, narratives, and self-understanding of the audience (Ogunyemi, 2021). This kind of depth, breadth, and sophistication is what moves mass communication scholarship from superficial content analysis to a nuanced comprehension of meaning as contextually anchored and contested.

By exploring the role of interpretation as a constructive process to be studied in its own right, its organ of 'producing meaning' beyond simply 'transmitting' a message (sending and receiving) as isolationist is correctional to medial outcome reductionism and dismisses the its interpretive aspects. That are the intercultural complexity of dynamic and dialogical

interactivity at the heartbeat of blurring contemporary communicational frameworks. ‘Social’ cyber (e)spaces, and the ex-145 communication that happens through them, stretched in every direction are intricate and multi-layered. Brian Whitaker asserts that there are epochs wherein a single (non-) utterance, serialization and replay at the timeline of an audio-visual frame, or a shard of such a montage, can and do generate within the matrix of a single planet. Hermeneutics (Thompson & Reyes, 2021) helps much in reflecting upon the shifts (in) engaging with the ‘audience’ that formulates x the boundaries of active (in) audience research. It is no longer the case to ask what media is saying. Rather what aspects of meaning do the ‘receptors’ appropriate for themselves and to what (sub) culture the meanings are ‘given’ within.

This takes Lussier’s definition of hermeneutic as a discipline that describes “ [T]he strategic issues and the choices a communicator makes to interpret and convey a message’ text and discourse-centered perspective.”

The issue of interpretation is both social meaning and the meaning of the utterances. As an extension of Foucault and Lyotard's work, hermeneutics prime themselves to show the social and political relations and the balance of power, ideological and otherwise, in the communication, the message itself, the utterance, and the struggle which structures the social relations that communication makes possible.

Moreover, with its multidisciplinary that incorporates political hermeneutics, the concentration on power relations in communication parallels much in communication and cultural studies with a more sociological outlook on the problem. This is to say that the application of hermeneutic theory and its analysis on issues of social structure, the media, and the relations predominant in a society can go beyond the marketing of various communications. The advocate blurs the distinction of theory and practice. It is rather the shift that reflexes the need to look to a more activist-based theory.

The underlying assumptions of hermeneutics for mass communication research remain methodological as well. Hermeneutic inquiry involves qualitative and, chiefly, interpretative methods which tend to be more in depth than broad. Researchers utilize a variety of methods, from textual analysis to ethnography to ethnography and even discourse analysis, to peel back the layers of meaning in communication practices (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Contrary to positivist research designs that are intended to be generalizable and predictive, hermeneutic approaches seek to enrich understanding by situating communication in context. This is the interpretive paradigm of social science, which attempts to grasp the subjective and multifaceted nature of human experience.

Therefore, in this seminar paper, the researcher will construct the philosophical foundations and history of development of hermeneutic theory alongside the application within the field of mass communication to ascertain its strengths and weaknesses. This will be a desk study as the researcher will rely on existing literature as well as theoretical work in situating hermeneutics in communication studies. Ultimately, this will inform the discussion about the theory’s current relevance in mass communication, especially in light of rapid changes in media. The researcher’s reflective conclusion focuses on mass communication as a profession and field of study, and the theory’s possible influence on the society, and the world at large.

2 History of the Hermeneutic Theory

Early History and Pioneering Scholars were carefully discussed here.

The German Friedrich Schleiermacher (late 18th to early 19th century) first proposed what has come to be known as general hermeneutics, according to which interpretation is both grammatical and psychological, to reconstruct the intentions of the author and the historical context of the text. Wilhelm Dilthey applied hermeneutics to human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) and believed that the interpretation of social and cultural phenomena is to be done through empathetic interpretation and not the natural science techniques. Martin

Heidegger (1927) oriented hermeneutics as ontological: interpretation is tied to the being-in-the-world of Dasein, and not understood as text-only. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960) developed philosophical hermeneutics using such terms as fusion of horizons, where the interpretation of the text does not exist in advance, but occurs in the dialogue between the interpreter and the text, and no objective and isolated meaning may exist. Paul Ricoeur stressed the autonomy of text: an author, when creating a text, might not be able to fully control it; the text can have a meaning, created through conflicts between this text and the context and the reader.

Hermeneutics was developed as a reaction to positivist paradigms that disregarded meaning, intention, and qualitative subtlety. Schleiermacher and Dilthey defended the idea that texts and human experiences need to be studied in depth, but Heidegger and Gadamer built on this approach by basing the interpretation on ontological and dialogic approaches.

Gradually, the principles of hermeneutics moved into media and communication as well as philosophy. As an exemplary case, the research by Tony Wilson (2022) reveals the application of the hermeneutic phenomenology based on Heidegger and Gadamer to the media-user practices in the framework of the hermeneutical horizons of understanding, which is identified in the situation in Malaysian multicultural settings. On the same note, Jensen (2018) theorized hermeneutics doubled in communication studies concerning the existing interpretation of social realities by individuals/audiences (media).

The hermeneutic theory has gained major advances in qualitative research in media, critical discourse analysis, and cultural analysis. It provides powerful instruments of framing analysis, narrative enquiry as well as interpretive depth, which is extensively used in the communication field of study and methods of research. Subjectivity and relativism put a lot of stress on the context of the interpreter, making the interpretations too personal or relative. In terms of methodological vagueness, the theory is critiqued that hermeneutics can be unsystematic, and it depends on much intuition. While in the area of Bias and power revealed that without reflexivity, we run the risk of not identifying our prejudices; some say that without reflexivity, hermeneutics can involuntarily reproduce patriarchal or hegemonic standpoints.

Position and Relevance Today

Hermeneutics can also be used in the analysis of social media narratives, news framing, identity formation, and intercultural communication. It helps to interpret complex mediated realities in which datafication, algorithmic logics, and social contexts are interlocked. As an example, hermeneutics-data: Jensen (2018) defines hermeneutics-data as the loops of interpretation in digital media studies. In a broader sense, hermeneutics helps in democratic discourse, ethical media participation, and the formation of identity in plural societies.

3 Methodology

The methodology employed in this seminar is the desk study. It is a literature-based enquiry study that is focused on peer-reviewed articles, theoretical literature, and case studies that are related to mass communication and hermeneutics.

Sources of Information are Wilson (2022) on hermeneutics in Malaysian media; Jensen (2018) on the topic of double hermeneutics in communication research; scholarly discussion of Gadamer and Ricoeur as methods in communication studies; and critiques of the hermeneutic approach.

The analytical orientation of data for this study is seen in the paradigm of the study, which shows the interpretive paradigm in line with hermeneutic philosophy-qualitative, contextually oriented, and reflexive. It builds knowledge based on the meaning that is construed by the communication scholarship instead of the generalization that is based on statistics.

The application of this theory to mass communication was reviewed, and found that Hermeneutics sheds light on the manner in which media messages (news reports, movie plots, political rhetoric, etc.) are interpreted differently by different culturally, ideologically, and

historically diverse people. To illustrate, news content about political unrest can have a different meaning to the Nigerians and the Westerners. Likewise, gender representation in the media can have a different interpretation within the sociocultural horizons.

Some of these case references explain it all:

In the situation of conflict news coverage, both media producers and researchers use the approach of a double hermeneutic loop because they interpret crises in terms of layers of meaning (Jensen, 2018).

In cases of Gender representation, hermeneutical analysis demonstrates that societal norms are present in the interpretation of media representations and require reading within a context.

When dealing with Political rhetoric, hermeneutics is used to deconstruct the manner in which the symbolic rhetoric is carried out in the context of historical memory and cultural frames to explain the how of persuasive media.

4 The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Hermeneutics Theory.

Strengths of Hermeneutics Theory

The study explains four strengths of this theory, thus;

1. Deep Interpretive Insight - Hermeneutics breaks through presentational content to get at the subtext, cultural codes, and symbolic resonance- essential to interpreting the complicated media texts.
2. Contextual and Cultural Sensitivity - Positioning the interpretation within the horizon of understanding, hermeneutics is concerned with the issue of the influence of cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts on the meaning (Wilson, 2022).
3. Improvement of Critical Thinking - Hermeneutics-based research promotes reflexivity, doubt and the discovery of biases- building interpretive maturity in scholars of media.
4. Flexibility Across Domains - Hermeneutics can be applied to literature, news, film, advertising and social media- flexible according to different types of media and situations in society.

Weaknesses of Hermeneutics Theory

The four phases of discussion of the weaknesses of this theory are as follows.

1. Relativism and Subjectivity - Risk - Concerns about interpretations include that they can contain a slice of personal prejudice or cultural relativism, which need not be constrained by empirical standards.
2. Lack of predictability - in this situation, Hermeneutic knowledge is not generalizable and cannot be replicated to a different context, and cannot be applied in an empirical, quantitative study.
3. Limited Fit and Quantitative Paradigms - Hermeneutics may be less useful to disciplines relying on data-based audience measurement, statistical modelling, or media effects.
4. The Abstraction to Policy (Hypothetical) - Hermeneutic results may be excessively abstract or subtle and useless to policy-makers who need guidance or measures.

5 Conclusion

Being a researcher in Mass Communication, I can affirm that the hermeneutic theory is unquestionably useful in the contemporary media landscape, namely: misinformation, cultural complexity and fragmented media ecologies. It is rich in its interpretations in how and why media messages resonate (or fail to resonate) with audiences, among other audiences. Despite the criticism of subjectivity, the benefit of hermeneutics is that it has a reflexive and situation-specific interpretation, and the quantitative approaches cannot provide the same. I suggest the following two approaches: to balance hermeneutic analysis with empirical tools, which would provide additional insights to the audience, and the aspects of nuance and generalizability of ideas can be reconciled.

Hermeneutics offers to Mass Communication as a profession the critical resources of interpretation- cultivating subtle communication and moral acuity. In the academic language of mass communication, the theory assists a researcher to advance on the existing research by providing background and context to analysis, especially of digital stories, the mediation and signifying of culture. Hermeneutic practice would be beneficial to society and the World in general because it enhances intercultural awareness, democratic participation, and media literacy, which would be a shield against globalized communication thin-slicing. In short, the hermeneutic theory is not a mere academic fancifulness, but a fundamental interpretative compass to negotiate the uncertainty of meaning in mass communication, society, and culture, on a larger scale.

6. Contribution of Hermeneutic Theory to Knowledge

The study of mass communication has benefited greatly from the use of hermeneutic theory, which has its roots in philosophical traditions of interpretation. It highlights meaning-making as a dynamic, context-dependent, and culturally mediated activity, challenging oversimplified conceptions of communication as a one-dimensional information transmission mechanism. Hermeneutics allows researchers to study the construction, contestation, and negotiation of meaning in mass communication when texts are shared among various audiences and platforms.

Hermeneutics' emphasis on interpretation that goes beyond surface-level material is among its most significant contributions. Hermeneutics investigates how media convey meaning through cultural codes, historical memory, and social situations rather than just what messages are conveyed (Gadamer, 2004). By acknowledging that audiences' lived experiences, language frameworks, and social positions shape interpretation, this viewpoint expands the study of media texts (Meyer & Simons, 2022). By embracing the diversity of meanings rather than favouring a single dominant reading, hermeneutics broadens the analytical purview of mass communication studies.

In order to connect communication studies with critical and cultural traditions, hermeneutic theory has also been essential. Hermeneutics, for example, sheds light on how news framing affects interpretation and how various communities interpret the same headline in different ways in journalism studies. For instance, one audience may interpret a report on political corruption as proof of systemic failure, while another audience may reject it as partisan propaganda (Nguyen, 2022). Hermeneutics emphasizes the ideological foundations of media material and its function in shaping public discourse by placing the interpretive act at the centre. In the age of digital and worldwide communication, hermeneutic theory provides important tools for comprehending the plurality of media interpretations. The instability of meaning is best illustrated by social media platforms, where writings can immediately spread across national and cultural borders. One context may applaud a tweet, meme, or brief video as satire while another may denounce it as offensive (Thompson & Reyes, 2021). By placing these interpretive tensions inside cultural contexts and communication practices, hermeneutic

inquiry aids in their analysis. Given the prevalence of misunderstandings in multicultural and cross-border communication, this contribution is especially pertinent.

Additionally, communication research approaches are enhanced by hermeneutic theory. It validates qualitative methods as rigorous forms of investigation, including textual interpretation, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By doing this, it offers a substitute for the positivist frameworks that are prevalent in the study of mass communication. Hermeneutics contends that contextual analysis and interpretative depth are necessary to fully comprehend human communication, which is not always quantifiable (Akinwale, 2023). Researchers may now find meanings buried in cultural narratives, symbolic forms, and communication practices thanks to this methodological change.

Lastly, by emphasizing the moral and societal obligations of the media, hermeneutics advances mass communication. Texts are never neutral; thus how they are interpreted has an impact on how collective identities are formed, how power systems are upheld or challenged, and how democratic participation is affected (Fuchs, 2020). Communication researchers may reveal how media shapes realities and provide crucial insights for promoting inclusive, dialogical, and responsible media practices by using hermeneutic analysis. The ability of hermeneutic theory to reinterpret communication as an interpretive, cultural, and socially entrenched process is what makes it a valuable contribution to mass communication. It has improved theoretical and methodological approaches by moving the emphasis from transmission to meaning-making, which makes it essential for comprehending the intricacies of communication in modern culture.

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